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Walking the Thylacine

Records of Indigenous Companion Animals in Australian Narrative and Photographic History

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Abstract

This report examines the history and significance of indigenous companion animals within traditional Aboriginal society and in early Euro-Australian settlements. Working from historical photographic and anthropological records, the project constructs a visual and written record of these often-transient human-animal relationships, including cockatoos who spoke in Aboriginal language; companion brolgas; and the traditions of raising the young of cassowary, emu, and dingo. It explores different pathways towards shared human and nonhuman animal spaces and how they found common ground outside of a contemporary model of domestication.

Keywords

human-animal studies – companion animals – tangible and intangible heritage – domestication

The history and significance of indigenous companion animals is an area that remains largely unexplored in Australia. Wild animals were a highly valued resource in both traditional Aboriginal society and in the early Euro-Australian settlements.

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Many species are woven into the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Australian Aboriginal people (Thomson, 1975; Tindale, 1974; Kolig, 1978). They were valued resources for food, clothing, decoration, and ceremonial purposes. This report focuses on a less studied area of these unique human-animal relationships—that of companionship.

The aim of this report is to explore these human-nonhuman animal relationships through narrative and photographic accounts to gain a greater understanding of that shared history before the anthropogenic influence of Euro-Australian culture largely displaced the ecocentric traditions of the Aboriginal people.

The study of animal behavior and evolution has been predominantly concerned with research into animals in their natural, "wild" state and environment, with little interest until recently in the behavior of tamed or domesticated animals. According to Clutton-Brock (1994), "Many have considered the tamed animal to be unnatural" (p. 23). This belief has resulted in a paucity of data recorded of these traditions, and it lowered the value assigned to studying the lives of animals who had been able to move sucessfully between human society and life in the wild. When Marine Captain Watkin Tench arrived with the first fleet to settle in Australia in 1788 he noted:

> The only domestic animal they (the Aboriginal people) have is the dog, which in their language is called dingo, and a good deal resembles the dog of England. These animals are equally shy of us and attached to the natives. (Tench, 1788, p. 54)

The general belief, even today, is that this was true. However, this report explores the positive associations between the Aboriginal people and many other species who shared their environment. Providing records of these species who were integrated into traditional life as transient companions enables these animals and traditions to enter the dialogue in the emerging field of human-animal studies. It is an opportunity to re-access the human-animal interface and the divisions that we have established—the physical, legal, and cultural barriers between modern human communities and the animals that share these environments.

The dingo (*Canis dingo*) had a long and enduring history of cohabitation with the Aboriginal people in Australia, with recent mitochondrial DNA data indicating that dingoes were introduced into Australia between 4,600 and 18,300 years BP (Oskarsson et al., 2011). Despite this length of time, it is widely acknowledged that the canine was never fully domesticated (Smith & Litchfield, 2009). How this happened poses a "considerable puzzle to Anthropology"

(Kolig, 1978, p. 84), but from the following accounts, we can identify it as not an entirely unique event. The young of many species were raised in the Aboriginal camps, as was the tradition with the dingo.

The report records ecocentric traditions of the Australian Aboriginal people, and their transient approach to companion animals and raising the young of wild animals (Kolig, 1978). These traditions supported companionship and autonomy, with an expectation that the animals would eventually return to the wild on reaching maturity (Thomson, 1978). It also explores formative interactions between Euro-Australians and the animals in their care in early days of colonization (Bennett, 1860; Marshall, 1966).

Materials and Methods

The data were gathered from original sources: photographic collections supported by personal accounts and publications in early anthropological and scientific journals. These accounts were recorded during the 18th and 19th centuries, and from remote areas where the traditional society and culture remained strong into the 20th Century.

The photographic images afford a unique view of this tangible and intangible heritage from which we can reconstruct elements of traditional life and emerging Euro-Australian culture. They were sourced from museum collections in Sydney and Canberra, and from the archives of the *Illustrated London News*. Wherever possible, the images were taken from the original glass plate negatives or reproduced from printed/digital sources where the location of the original plates was unknown. These photographs were recorded by explorers including Dr. Herbert Basedow and Donald Thomson in remote regions of central and northern Australia, areas previously largely unexplored by Europeans.

Early colonial historical narrative also provides records of how Euro-Australians negotiated their interactions with animals, adopting mammals and birds who had been raised from infancy in the Aboriginal camps, as well as encouraging wildlife to settle around the homestead with many benefits for the humans and nonhuman communities.

Terminology

Indigenous or native fauna is legally described as species that occur naturally in the environment and were present in Australia or an external territory before 1400 AD (Australian Law Information Institute, 2015). The term native is synonymous with indigenous (Allaby, 2012); however, it is argued that the

dingo is not indigenous to Australia, as it is believed to have arrived here in the company of Southeast Asian seafarers, 4,600-plus years BP (Oskarsson et al., 2011). "Introduced species" are classified as having been placed in the environment as a result of human activity (Allaby, 2012), which may be the case with the dingo, but given their indigenous heritage value—their significance in the practices, observations, traditions, customs, beliefs, and history of the Aboriginal people (Cahir & Clark, 2013; Rose, 2011)—in addition to their functioning role as apex predator in the native ecosystem over this period of time (Glen et al., 2007), it would be incorrect to classify them as not indigenous.

Marsupial Companions and Talking Birds

Medical doctor, scientist, and explorer Herbert Basedow (1881-1933) provides a photographic and narrative record offering a rare insight into traditions of raising companion animals in remote Aboriginal communities in the early 1900s. Through his camera lens, we see the Northern brushtailed possum (*Trichosurus arnhemensis*) riding on the head of the young Aboriginal woman companion in Figures 1 and 2.

> The King Sounds (hunters) catch the small ring-tailed possums, which live in the mangroves, and hand them to the children. The Ponga-Ponga (women) become very attached to these marsupial pets, which they carry around with them on their days' outings planted in the locks of their hair. The possums seem quite contented to abide there whilst their mistresses are on the march and hang on by means of their claws and tail. (Basedow, 1925, p. 88)

Basedow wrote that the young woman has the strings of a basket balanced on her head, suggesting that she was also carrying a bag or basket on her back along with the small marsupial in her care.

The photographs of this time were taken with large-format cameras and recorded on fragile glass plate negatives, using cumbersome equipment with long exposure times—accounting for the rarity of these images in the archives.

Basedow also recorded traditions of keeping cockatoos—perhaps the red-tailed black cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*) or the rose-breasted cockatoo (*Eolophus roseicapilla*), commonly known as the galah—in the Aboriginal communities along the coastal region of Western Australia. He observed and recorded two accounts of birds speaking in Aboriginal language, kept as companions by elder members of the community.

FIGURE 1
Ponga Ponga woman and pet possum. Western Arnhem Land. Photo: Herbert Basedow, 1922, glass plate negative. By Permission of the National Museum of Australia IRN 11728.

FIGURE 2
"Ponga Ponga woman carrying pet possum on her head while on the march." Western Arnhem Land. Photo and caption: Herbert Basedow, 1922.

> On Sunday Island, several cockatoos were kept by a fishing party in their camp, not far from shore. The birds had their flight feathers pulled and were allowed to roam about the country in search of food. The cockatoos seemed to regard the huts as their home, to which they invariably returned; they had, moreover, picked up many phrases of the Aboriginal tongue. (Basedow, 1925, p. 89)

In the Western Kimberly, Basedow noted on Tuesday, May 9, 1916:

> The men had their [women], children, and an unruly yowling cortege of dogs with them. And one old [woman] had a tame cockatoo which vociferated as excited as its mistress in the Aboriginal tongue, requesting the ronions to lie down. (Basedow, 1918, p. 64)

In traditional Aboriginal camps, the men often brought home animals from their hunting expeditions, to entertain the children. These could be the young of kangaroos, lizards, parrots, or the young of large bird species who ranged across the country, illustrated in Thomson's portrait of Tjamindjinyu with Black Butcherbird (*Cracticus quoyi*) and Skink Lizard (*Ctenotus inornatus*), Queensland (Figure 3)—Thomson noted that the skink and bird, both raised in the camp, were often observed playing together (1936). Anthropologist Norman Tindale (1900-1993) wrote that although dingo pups were most commonly kept as companion animals, many other species were at times raised in the camps.

> There are a few other animals occasionally to be seen about aboriginal camps, largely as temporary pets, and a few semi-domesticated birds left alone for their contribution of eggs. (Tindale, 1974, p. 109)

There were rules and mythology surrounding the treatment of these companion animals in traditional Aboriginal culture, as in a cautionary tale from Arnhem Land that tells about the playful but dangerous Mimih spirits who live in the stone country. The spirits are said to be very shy and will only venture out at night or if they are disturbed. Mimih spirits are not against people hunting wild animals for food, but they are said to look after the animals who have come in from the wild and are in the care of the community, animals that have become companions. The children are warned that if they hurt a companion animal or bird, the Mimih spirits will come out at night and punish them (Tweedy, 1998).

FIGURE 3 *Tjamindjinyu* (*Tommy*)*, Ompela Tribe, with Black Butcherbird* (Cracticus quoyi) *and Skink Lizard* (Ctenotus inornatus)*, Queensland—Thomson noted that the skink and bird, both raised in the camp, were often observed playing together. Photo by D. F. Thomson, 1936. Courtesy of the Thomson Family and Museum Victoria.*

> Although the native animals and birds of Australia have always been, and still are, the daily object of aboriginal chase, it is a remarkable fact that great friendships are made between the hunter and his would-be prey when the latter is in captivity. (Basedow, 1925, p. 88)

Between expeditions, Basedow returned to his home in Adelaide, South Australia. His interest in observing human-animal companions on his travels is reflected at home, where he lived with many birds including "laughing jacks" (kookaburras), magpies, and cockatoos (Kaus, 2008). Basedow is pictured in Figure 4, in the company of his "stately" emu.

FIGURE 4 *Dr. Herbert Basedow in the garden using a hose to shower his pet Emu, ca. 1917. Searcy collection, reproduced with permission of the State Library of South Australia, b2140686.*

Basedow commented on the level of trust between the people and semi-wild animals and birds, which suggested a level of alliance between them.

> I have seen cases where semi-wild cockatoos, magpies, and other birds have allowed themselves to be handled by the Aboriginal people without much concern, but the moment a European attempted to do likewise, the bird would become unmanageable, terrified, and vicious. Partly domesticated birds seem to have a predilection for perching themselves on the legs of their native masters when the latter are sitting or lying on the ground. (Basedow, 1925, p. 89)

In this ecocentric tradition of human-nonhuman animal cohabitation, there is an acknowledged sharing of resources, and of the necessity of encouraging relationships that support both autonomy and degrees of mutual dependance. Anthropologist Tim Ingold describes this as "being with animals in the immediate environment where there is no divide between human and nonhuman spaces" (Ingold, 1994, p. 19).

In "From Trust to Domination," Ingold explores human-animal relations within the hunter-gatherer cultural framework. The "consideration and respect" shown to the environment in the way communities utilize land and resources comes with a caveat—an expectation that in return for this care, the

environment will ensure the human community is provided with all they need to thrive (Ingold, 1994, p. 9).

In some instances, the relationship worked directly in mutually beneficial agreements between species, as in the case of vulnerable terrestrial bird populations in Australia. Tindale described a "truce" between some species of ground-dwelling birds and the Aboriginal people, who afforded the birds protection in return for a plentiful supply of eggs. This included mallee fowl (*Leipoa ocellata*), scrub hens (*Magapodius freyanet*), and scrub turkeys (*Alectura lathami*): "but for this special status, it would have been unlikely that these mound building birds would have survived" (Tindale, 1974, p. 109).

There were fewer records of interaction between the young of kangaroos and wallabies in the Aboriginal camps, but Tindale recorded a euro (wallaroo *Macropus robustus*) sucessfully reared in camp.

> At Kulikuli in Western Australia, a full grown euro reared among the dogs moved freely about the Njangamarda camp. It had remained there for some time. (Tindale, 1974, p. 109)

Basedow also recorded a cautionary tale that sets boundaries around the treatment of these young animals in camp.

> In the camps of any of the tribal groups throughout Australia . . . one might see captive birds and animals temporarily tethered or kept for the amusement of children. Such are usually brought home by the men returning from their hunting expeditions. The young wallaby, for instance, is let go on an open flat and all the children set after it. They are not allowed to hurl stones or sticks after the fleeing game, but must retake it alive by the use of their hands only. Although it is against the rules to harm a captured animal, it is a curious circumstance that a native, even if grown up, invariably forgets to feed it, although entertaining the idea of keeping it alive. Occasionally, however, it happens that a creature survives and looks after its own needs; in this case the animal or bird becomes a real pet and it is not made the object of children's coursing matches anymore. (Basedow, 1925, p. 88)

Cassowary, Emu, and the "Native Companion"

Among the Kongkanji and other Barrinean people in the rain forest areas, cassowary chicks were tethered for a few days until tamed and thereafter roamed freely about camp as young birds for up to a year. They were then usually killed

FIGURE 5 *Aboriginal woman in Cape York, with young cassowary and basket, 1928. Photo by D. F. Thomson*, Illustrated London News, *June 4, 1955, from the digital archive: Gale–Cengage Learning*, Illustrated London News, *2013.*

and eaten, there being no remembered attempt to encourage breeding of any as domesticated birds (Tindale, 1975, p. 109).

Anthropologist Donald Thomson wrote that normally Aboriginal people did not tame or domesticate animals other than the dingo, but that they sometimes brought the young of emu or cassowary chicks home to be reared in the camp (Thomson, 1954). This is illustrated in Figure 5, a glass plate negative taken by Thomson in Cape York, 1928, of a woman feeding seeds soaked water to her cassowary. From Thomson's (1950) description of the birds at the camps:

> There are few more amusing creatures than a baby cassowary; the natives, who capture the chicks, rear them in their camps, where the birds follow them about even when they are hunting. These chicks are quite at home and follow their Aboriginal masters like dogs, going into the scrub to look for the wild berries and fruits upon which they subsist, and returning to camp of their own accord. (Thomson, 1950, p. 34)

Medical Doctor and naturalist George Bennett (1804-1893) recorded detailed accounts of two young cassowaries he kept at his home in Sydney over the spring and summer of 1857 to 1858. The birds had been raised in the traditional

manner by the people of New Britain, before traveling for eight months on the ocean vessel *Oberon* down the southeastern coast of Australia. Bennett acquired the cassowaries in October 1857.

The tradition of raising young cassowaries was strong in neighboring Papua New Guinea and the Island of New Britain, where the birds were considered sacred and kept as companions. The birds would be captured very young, soon after hatching, and reared by hand. The adults were reportedly very shy and difficult to approach if they were not raised in this manner (Bennett, 1860).

> The (Islanders) carry them in their arms, and entertain a great affection for them, which will account for their domesticated state with us. (Bennett, 1860, p. 243)

These cassowaries, *Casuarius bennetti* (named after the Doctor himself), were a smaller species of cassowary than the one found on mainland Australia. He described the young birds as very docile, sociable, and quite at ease at once they were at the homestead. Bennett's household did not place confines on the mammal and birdlife around the homestead, which provided for rare and interesting accounts of cohabitation between the wild and domesticated animals in their care. Bennett writes of the cassowaries:

> One or both of them would walk into the kitchen, and while one was dodging under the tables and chairs, the other would leap up on the table, keeping the cook in a state of excitement; or they could be heard in the hall or in the library, in search of food or information; or they would walk up-stairs, and then quickly descend again, making their peculiar chirping, whistling noise; not a door could be left open, but in they walked. (Bennett, 1860, p. 252)

The cassowaries displayed "great fondness and attachment" to Dr. Bennett and his staff, standing attentively beside the groom when he attended to the horses, watching every detail of harnessing the horses to the gig or carriage, and other duties, with great interest. Their chosen place of roost was under the table in the library (Bennett, 1860, p. 257).

> When writing in my study, a chirping, whistling noise is heard; the door which is ajar, is pushed open, and in walk the Mooruks (cassowaries), who quietly pace around the room, inspecting everything, then as peaceably go out again. (Bennett, 1860, p. 252)

FIGURE 6 *Bennett's mooruk appears in the* Illustrated London News, *July 9, 1864, from the digital archive: Gale–Cengage Learning*, Illustrated London News, *2013.*

Six months after their arrival, they were shipped off on the eight-week voyage to London, arriving in "excellent health and condition" on May 17, 1859 (Bennett, 1860, p. 263). They appeared in the *Illustrated London News* after sucessfully raising two young in the London Zoo in 1864. In previous years, the hatchlings had not survived, so a chicken (etched beside the cassowaries in Figure 6), had nursed the young for two days before they were "consigned to the care of their anxious father." Male cassowaries, like the emu, incubate the eggs and raise the young without the assistance of the female (Anon., 1864).

By nature, the cassowaries were far more inquisitive than another large bird in residence with Dr. Bennett at the same time, a jabiru who had been hand raised for four months by Aboriginal people in Port Macquarie.

The jabiru or black-necked stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) is a large, generally silent, monogomus water bird, standing 1.3 to 1.5 m high, with a 2-m wingspan. They are now almost extinct from their former range in New South Wales (NMA, 2014). Bennett's accounts describe a bird that had clearly been raised with great gentleness and consideration, and was at home with the new domestic arrangements. The jabiru "walked about the yard of the house quite domesticated, making no attempt to fly, nor showing any inclination to leave its domicile" (Bennett, 1860, p. 195).

> (His) attitudes and bearing . . . have a combination of grace and elegance, and (he) displays an independence of manner well suited to a bird so wild and roaming in its habits. (He) is gentle and good tempered, soon gets reconciled to captivity, and seems to take pleasure in being noticed and admired, remaining very quiet to be looked at. . . . The eyes are large

> and remarkably brilliant, and yet impart great docility of expression. (Bennett, 1860, p. 196)

The jabiru also displayed a more patient nature than the cassowaries; when he was hungry he would seek out the cook and wait by the kitchen door while the kitchen staff prepared the fresh meat or fish to be served for his dinner. From Bennett's description:

> The bird (jabiru) is as tame as the Native Companion when in captivity, but will not follow anyone about, as that bird will, nor has it uttered any sound . . . the jabiru is also very grave in its habits, compared to the Native Companion, and does not appear to be addicted to those flighty habits of dancing about which are so conspicuous in the latter bird. (Bennett, 1860, p. 200)

The bird that Bennett was referring to here was the brolga, a crane species endemic to Australia that were "called the native companion in colonial times because they were said to accompany Aboriginal people on their wanderings" (Reardon, 2007, p. 3). In an account of a tame brolga, Bennett writes, "Its flight is easy and graceful; it is soon domesticated and struts about even in crowded streets, perfectly tame, readily feeding from the hand (Bennett, 1860, p. 222).

Anthropologist Erich Kolig comments that the Aboriginals did not hunt the brolga; the tribes of the Southern Kimberly found the flesh was bitter and did not make good eating, which may account for the peaceable relationship between the Aboriginal community and the bird (Kolig, 1978, p. 99). The brolga lived on a diet of tubers, bulbs, seeds, insects, and lizards, so foraging together with the Aboriginal people would have been advantageous for both the birds and their human companions (personal observation).

Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*)

Figure 7 (Thomson, 1935) shows the young Garamarli with his father and five emu chicks who had been recently captured by a hunter in the northern Gulf of Carpentaria. The chicks, from two separate broods, were still in the juvenile, striped phase of plumage.

> The birds quickly become tame and follow their adopted human 'father' (young Garamarli) like dogs, snapping at odds and ends of food around the camp, uttering at the same time a querulous piping sound with which

FIGURE 7 *Wonggo and his son Garamarli with five Emu chicks in camp, Caledon Bay, 1935. Photo: D. F. Thomson*, Illustrated London News, *July 24, 1954 from the digital archive: Gale–Cengage Learning*, Illustrated London News, *2013.*

> they normally keep in touch with the parent bird when foraging in the bush. (Thomson, 1935)

The emu is an omnivorous, nomadic, flightless bird. Not monogamous, they nest in winter and the pair remain together for 4 to 5 months. Males incubate the eggs, 5 to 15 in a clutch, for around a period of 55 days, and guard the young until they are 6 months old (Olsen et al., 1993, p. 181).

> People ate (emus) out of necessity and it was not long before they were made pets. . . . In the domain, near Government house, some tame emus may be seen walking about, and often, near the Guard-house, marching with measured pace, as if keeping guard with the soldiers on duty. One day, during a levée, when the Domain was crowded with people to see the arrivals and to listen to the bands, the emus mingled with the crowd, apparently enjoying the gay scene around them. (Bennett, 1860, p. 219)

Many native species were recorded around the emerging settlements in early Euro-Australian history. It was soon discovered that there was a notable advantage in encouraging some small native bird and marsupial species to settle

around the house and yard. Kookaburras were effective at controlling snake and mice populations:

> [The kookaburra] that useful, interesting and easily domesticated bird. . . . Unlike kingfishers, I never observed them procuring their food from the water; they have more the habit of birds of prey, and when kept as pets about a house, or in a graden, will watch for small game like a cat. (Bennett, 1860, p. 177)

Another resident in the Bennett household was a magpie (*Cracticus tibicen*), a highly skilled mimic ("it is a bird of much importance in its own estimation," Bennett, 1860, p. 224) who made a fearless guardian of the homestead, sounding the alarm whenever a stranger came to the property by keeping up "an incessent noise" until the stranger was either attended to or driven away. This magpie was capable of a delivering a convincing dog bark, imitating the crowing of a rooster and meowing of a cat, and whistling renditions of popular tunes of the day. Another favorite skill was to imitate the cackling of a hen who has just laid an egg, sending the cook off on a misguided search for pantry supplies. The magpie was also fond of playing dead.

> He would remain quiet, with his feet uppermost, as if dead; the cunning, twinkling eye, which he never ventured to close, showing all the time his life and vivacity. (Bennett, 1860, p. 226)

Bilbies (*Macrotis*) were prized for their skill at pest control around house and yard:

> By the early colonists the bilby . . . was even accorded a certain amount of protection and was at times kept as a pet about the house . . . it was recognised that, in the destruction of mice and insects it played an extremely useful part. (Wood-Jones, 1923, p. 164)

The sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) was also highly valued ". . . this beautiful animal is one of the most attractive of marsupials, easily bred in captivity and a delightful pet" (Troughton, 1944, p. 96). Another marsupial who makes an appearance in the history books is the wombat (most commonly *Vombatus ursinus*).

> The baby wombat will grow into a charming pet but it is difficult (though not impossible) to house train. When locked out at night it tends to gnaw through your kitchen door or burrow under the garage. Liberated, it may remain affectionate for life. (Marshall, 1966, p. 56)

FIGURE 8 *Thylacine, photographed in the Bronx Zoological Gardens, 1903.* Illustrated London News, *December 22, 1934, from the digital archive: Gale–Cengage Learning*, Illustrated London News, *2013.*

The Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisii*) is described as "a charismatic charmer with a short fuse" in a recent account with their human companions (Owen & Pemberton, 2005, p. 15). Mary Roberts, the owner and operator of Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart from 1895 to 1921, raised and cared for a large range of native species in addition to the zoo's exotic wildlife. She wrote that the "Tasmanian devils were her favorite creatures" (Owen & Pemberton, p. 86). Her article,

> "The Keeping and Breeding of Tasmanian Devils," written for the London Zoological society, stated that despite much growling and showing of teeth when frightened, the female devils were very gentle both with their human carer and with their young (Owen & Pemberton, 2005).

From archeological evidence, we know that this charismatic, carnivorous, marsupial lived in the cave systems also inhabited by the Aboriginal people in Tasmania (Owen & Pemberton, 2005). How much interaction there was between them was perhaps never recorded.

Walking the Thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*)

The thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), was commonly portrayed as a predatorial, wolf-like creature in early Euro-Australian narrative history. The marsupial carnivores were believed to pose a threat to human safety and to the emerging livestock industry in the southern Australian island State of Tasmania where the last remaining population survived. They were relentlessly hunted and collected, with over 500 specimens being sent to international museums and often placed in the local zoological gardens. Figure 8 shows a thylacine in the American Bronx Zoo that was "kept for several years, winter and summer, in one of (the) large fox dens" (Grant, 1910, p. 615) before joining the permanent collection at the American Museum of Natural History. The last known member of the species died in Hobart zoo on September 7, 1936 (Paddle, 2000).

"Walking the Thylacine" refers to lesser known records of positive human-thylacine interactions. The thylacine was a social animal known to survive within a family structure similar to canines, with an adult pair rearing two to four young. Their cooperative behavior involved hunting, establishing home territory, cooperative parenting, and complex structures of behavioral and vocal communication between conspecifics (Paddle, 2000).

There was a small but persistant group of Euro-Australian settlers in Tasmania who chose to treat the animals with consideration and kindness. "Captive thylacines were treated just like dogs: they wore collars and were walked on a lead" (Paddle, 2000, p. 72). They were affectionate with their human companions, though they were always weary of strangers. These accounts focus on nonaggressive interactions; when they were offered kind treatment and a good feed, they settled in well, and were effective in their role as watchdog around the homesteads. The thylacine would vocalize loudly when strangers were approaching, which was "an ability for which they were prized and held to be markedly superior to the domestic dog" (Paddle, 2000, p. 68).

This is not a singular observation, but from many accounts recorded over a 100-year history of the thylacine in Euro-Australian society, before the species' extinction (Paddle, 2000 pp. 69-74). There is little evidence surviving to elucidate the interactions between these carnivorous marsupials and the Aboriginal people of Tasmania, though it is established that this varied across the island. Some hunted the thylacine, a tradition also recorded in ancient rock art on the mainland. Other tribes revered them—affording the animals special burials when they died, by constructing a small hut over the bones to protect them from the elements. The belief was that there would be retribution from the spirit world if these customs were not respected and upheld (Paddle, 2000, p. 20).

> For a handful of humans in the past, the captive marsupial wolf provided an experience of perception and friendship . . . [this] was not a transient, passing social fad, but something practiced continously over one hundred years, by perceptive individuals with a love and interest in the species. (Paddle, 2000, p. 239)

Narrinyeri and Their Snakes

The Narrinyerri people of South Australia record a tradition similar to the Samoan and North American custom of totem animals—this is found in varying degrees throughout Australia, where the Aboriginal people assign a totem animal or "dreaming" to each child from (and before) birth. For the Narrinyeri, they believe that they each have a ngaitye, a good and intelligent being "who takes an interest in their welfare" (Taplin, 1874, p. 63).

It can be a snake, dingo, bird, or insect. No one will kill their own ngaitye, though there are exceptions if the animal is a valuable food source (Taplin, 1874). George Taplin wrote of these traditions of care concerning members of the Narrinyerri who have various species of snakes as their ngaitye, so they did not like to kill them. Instead, they would take the snakes to keep as companions—pulling the snakes' teeth to render them harmless and then keeping them in a basket hung from the end of their wurley.

One of these he observed was a large female tiger snake (*Notechis scutatus*), who gave birth to 16 young after her incarceration. This proved too much for the other members of the tribe who did not share her as a totem, with the snake and her young meeting an unfortunately swift end.

Taplin's account is accurate of the large, venomous snake who can grow up to 7 feet long. They have a bite that is potentially fatal to humans, but they are described as nonaggressive (NMA, 2013). The tiger snake ranges throughout the southern regions of Australia and Tasmania. They are viviparous, giving birth to 14 to 40-plus live young. Their life expectancy is up to 15 years. Removal of the snakes' fangs or venom glands, or severing the duct between the gland and the fang, are now performed by veteranarians; the snakes are then called venomoid. As the teeth can regenerate, removal of them is only a temporary measure. Although they are aggressive when they are first caught, the snakes apparently settle down well and are very easy to keep in captivity, as they do not require a great level of animal husbandry (Hoser, 2007). It would be likely then that this arrangement was temporary and the snakes could have eventually returned to wild existence, given the opportunity.

FIGURE 9 *"We ate pythons by the yard. But sometimes they tried to eat our dogs. Grilled snake is known as 'soft' tucker, and was generally given to the old people." Donald Lockwood, 1964 (cf. Liasis, olive or water python, location North-Western Australia).*

Snakes, lizards and carnivourous marsupials were sometimes kept to invince respect towards their keepers, affording them a level of status or protection (Figure 9).

> Howitt (1904:388) records that an old woman had a tame native cat (a Spotted quoll, *Dasyurus maculatus*) which she carried about with her and which was believed to injure people during sleep at her wish. The pet seamed to have a function similar to the individual totems and especially to the alter ego of sorcerers. These spirit doubles, according to Elkin (1933:114), were also externalised in the species, perhaps especially present in a tamed member of the species. Primarily tamed snakes and lizards were exhibited by sorcerers as outer manifestations of spiritual powers. (Kolig, 1978, pp. 94-95)

Dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*)

Despite the long, enduring relationship between Aboriginal communities and the dingo, the wild canines were never domesticated to any lasting effect. The young animals were brought up in camp and nurtured until they became self-sufficient and returned to the wild as adults to breed. Despite the length of contact, genetic testing indicated the dingo has been in Australia for somewhere

between 5,000 and 18,300 years (Oskarsson et al., 2011), and dingoes did not lose their prey drive, independence, or abilities to escape confines, locate prey, and survive within a socially complex pack structure similar to that of the northern wolf (Breckwold, 1988; Miklosi, 2007; Smith & Litchfield, 2010). Even after over 200 years of contact with Euro-Australian society the dingo remains essentially wild.

Donald Thomson recorded dingoes in his journals and on film (moving and still images) while he was living in camps in remote regions of Arnhem Land in the 1930s (illustrated in Figure 10 and Figure 11) and Central Australia in the 1950s. He observed that they exhibited a strong instinctive natal philopatry—love of place of birth—and never stayed in the camps once they were mature (Thomson, 1985).

> The natives assure me that most of the dingoes they have captured go bush when they grow up. I am convinced, from my own experience of the rarity of real dingoes even in the remote camps in the interior of eastern Arnhem Land, of the truth of this fact. (Donald Thompson, cited in Dixon & Huxley, 1985, p. 170)

Other evidence is reported by Kolig.

> Adult dingo pets habitually disappear sooner or later into the bush and so, traditionally, the problem of a canine population explosion in the camps was thwarted. (Kolig, 1978, p. 93)

The tangible and intangible heritage of the Aboriginal people of Australia places dingoes into a central role in cultural life. Dingoes have their own landscape formations, star constellations, and Dreamtime stories across the continent (Thomson, 1985; Rose, 2000; Rose, 2011). The role they played in the daily lives of the women and children (see Figure 10 and Figure 12) as companions and guardians should not be underestimated. They provided protection against wildlife and human or spiritual intruders, assisted in the location of small game, and were prized as a living blanket at night. As Donald Thomson noted in 1928:

> Tommy told me last night that when the puppies are captured very young they are fed on meat hammered to pulp, and if too young for that, are fed at the breast (‘tjo’tjo) by the women. His own wife, Chako, fed one of the dogs he still has in this fashion. When rearing it—as Tommy put it, the child had one side, the puppy the other. (Dixon & Huxley, 1985, p. 166)

FIGURE 10 *Burrmilakili with young dingo, Tjirrmango (Echidna), in Arnhem Land, 1936. Photo: D. F. Thomson. Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria.*

FIGURE 11 *Raiwalla with young dingo: partner image to Figure 10, Arnhem Land, 1936. Photo: D. F. Thomson. Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria.*

FIGURE 12 *"Wongapitcha women carrying dogs which they hold across their backs to enjoy the warmth of the animals' bodies," Central Australia. Photo and caption: Herbert Basedow, 1924. Glass plate negative, by permission of the* NMG *Macintosh collection, J. L. Shellshear museum, University of Sydney.*

Anthropologist Charles Mountford (1890-1976) recorded the following accounts of the relationship between the dingo and the Aboriginal people of Australia in remote areas in the 20th century:

> I had been impressed by the close companionship between the aboriginal and his dog—which is, of course, the wild dog (or dingo) he has tamed for hunting. The creature lives as much in the life of the family as do the children; it sits around the same tiny fire, and at night lies close to the man or the woman, I had often seen Jabiaba asleep with his dog on his arm. Even the newly born baby at Ernabella had to share the fire with the dog belonging to the mother. (Mountford, 1969, p. 183)

Mountford's records indicate that a great level of kindness and tolerance was extended to the canines who lived in the camps, indiciative of what is described as the relationship of "trust" established on occasion between hunter-gatherer tribes and the wild animals in their care—an ecocentric tradition of cohabitation, unlike the pathway to domestication, which is described as one of domination in agricultural societies (Ingold, 1994).

> An Aboriginal seldom hits his dog, though when a white man demands that the dogs be kept away from his camp—they usually come to steal—the position is different; then the Aboriginals, ever courteous to those they accept, will chase dogs away. But the dogs suffer so little punishment at the hands of their masters that it was difficult to make them leave our camp when they come on entirely peaceful errands. Several times when writing up my diary late at night I felt something creep up against me, and on looking down saw some poor scarecrow of a dog which had made the mistake of thinking I was one of the brown people. I would give the dog a push, and in my best European manner yell, 'Get out', something that would have made a dog belonging to a white man shrink and run. But not so with the Aboriginal's dog; it simply did not know what the noise meant, and when I pushed it away it looked at me in a puzzled manner and crept back to its old position. (Mountford, 1969, p. 185)

Aboriginal Protector in the early 1800s, William Thomas recorded the following account of the changing canine-human relationships, as the Aboriginal communities adjusted to the changes sweeping through their world after colonization.

> The Kulin rejected many European Novelties but embraced some enthusiastically. Dogs became great favourites, Aboriginal groups being trailed by packs of 'half-starved' dogs. These were European dogs, not native dogs (dingoes). Aborigines kept them as pets, and embraced them as such, literally so at night for their warmth. William Thomas claimed that 'if a European's favourite dog but one night sleeps in a black encampment, it will do all it can to get back to them.' (Broome, 2005, p. 22)

The suggestion is that the dogs themselves instigated their own migration towards the camps, moving in as the dingoes became increasingly rare. By the late 19th century, there was a bounty on the dingos' heads, and it was too dangerous to keep these wild companions in the camps and settlements alongside the emerging agricultural industry (Breckwoldt, 1988).

Conclusion

In 1697, the Dutch skipper William de Vlamingh sailed to Western Australia. His records from Jurien Bay state:

> We went inland nearly one and a half miles, but found neither people or fresh water, only several footsteps of Men and prints of that of a dog and Cassowary . . . . Some others said . . . they saw a yellow dog leaping from the wild herbage, and throwing itself into the sea, as if to amuse himself with swimming. (Cited in Whitely, 1970, p. 19)

It is curious to realize that the account could be refering to a single traveling party: the men, dingo, and a large nomadic bird exploring the landscape together. Research into this shared history offers an opportunity to understand more about how the companions evolved to thrive in this fragile landscape. It questions the barriers that we place in contemporary society between the human environment and wild spaces—the physical, legal, and cultural boundaries preventing these indigenous species to flourish beside modern urban and remote human communities.

According to Aboriginal traditions, animals teach us how to "live harmoniously and cautiously in an environment which is both nurturing and dangerous" (Parker, 2006, p. iii). These interactions are constructed within an environment with no divide between human and nonhuman animal spaces, and there is nothing random in the communities' understanding of the animal behavior and the workings of local ecology.

One reason these species were never domesticated could be that there was no necessity to—as long as they retained their mobility, they could survive, forage, and hunt for themselves. In an environment where fire, flood, and drought are natural events, this ability to retain independence and freedom of movement is perhaps the key to their success and long-term survival. Adopting sustainable ways of protecting and utilizing Australia's natural resources may require dismantling some of the barriers constructed between human and nonhuman animal spaces in the contemporary environment, with the promise of many benefits to both communities in the process.

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